



A well-crafted employee handbook can save you headaches — and heartaches — in the long run

BY THE

BOOK

BY GLENNA HECHT, SPHR

Color inside the lines. Don't talk to strangers. Eat your vegetables. Don't text and drive. Follow the speed limit. Show up on time. Adhere to the dress code. Record all hours worked.

You get the idea.

These rules are common in our lives, and in our workplaces. But, if they are so common, why do we need signs posted or handbooks printed? Not every county, city or business has the same rules, guidelines or laws. If you don't tell me yours, I don't know them, and I follow the rules from my last company or I make up my own. Have you ever scratched your head over something an employee did, and asked, "Why would they do that? Aren't they adults?" Yes, they are. But, perhaps they did that because you did not tell them what you expected of them!

Rules are important, whether you are five, 15 or 52. Everyone needs boundaries to understand how to conduct themselves in their environment. Everyone needs a framework that clearly communicates expectations. A tool that helps communicate this information and protect the company is an employee handbook. A handbook should not be confused with an operations manual; one communicates guidelines and the other communicates "how-to."

Instead, think of a handbook as an extension of your company brand, something that is typically provided on the first day of employment to set people on the right course of behavior, right from the start. You spend a significant amount of time and money recruiting the best candidates for your company, and getting them started on the right foot is essential. The handbook should reflect your values and company voice, and create another opportunity to reinforce why you are an employer of choice.

Develop a Handbook

So — you're convinced you need a handbook; but now the question becomes: Where to begin? Here are some common approaches, along with pros and cons for each.

Templates

Many organizations purchase a template with the goal of filling in the blanks and creating their own handbooks.

Pros: You have some language that will help you to start writing your own handbook.

Cons: Some templates may not be suited to your business; others will include components that do not apply. Tailoring those templates to your business can be time-consuming.

Tip: If you have a designated staff member or outside expert who can focus on developing the handbook, you will be more successful. If you choose to go this route, ensure that person understands the

specific laws and areas of compliance related to your business.

Models

Some organizations dust off a handbook that a leader may have used in a prior company or borrowed from a peer company.

Pros: Like templates, models or samples borrowed from other businesses can give you a starting point and some guidance in the proper wording.

Cons: When you go this route, it is like borrowing a golf club, bicycle, or outfit: It isn't "you" and usually doesn't fit.

Tip: If you borrow a handbook from another organization, take the time to customize that text and ensure that the style reflects your organization's voice. Some handbooks may be written in a very formal tone, and others, in a more casual, relaxed style. Don't confuse your employees! If the company is more casual and the handbook is very rigid, you are sending mixed signals.

Customized

Hiring an outside resource to create a handbook for your organization is another alternative. The external expert should already understand the legal and compliance issues that must be included in your handbook; this will save time in development.

Pros: Someone who knows the law inside and out will be writing the handbook for you — and that expertise can save you time and money in the long run.

Cons: The cost of hiring an expert may be prohibitive to some businesses.

Tip: You can utilize an attorney or human resource professional, but ensure that the resource understands the industry, your company, and the challenges you face as well as your values and goals.

One option I caution all business owners against: Going without a handbook. In this business climate, that is not a good idea.

Employees need to know your rules and guidelines. A well-written handbook can be used as a defense in employee relations issues, unemployment claims or EEOC charges. In my experience, the questions always asked in investigations are, "Did they know what you expected? Where was this written and shared with the employee?"

HANDBOOK HELP

Society of American Florists members have access to a free, customizable employee handbook template to help get you started on the task. (Of course, you'll want to take Glenna Hecht's advice to customize this version to meet your needs and serve your business!) Find out more at safnow.org/moreonline.

When the answer is yes, and you can share the handbook, with a signed acknowledgment by the employee, the burden shifts to the employee to explain why the behavior occurred.

Include Must-Have Info

Regardless of the approach you take, any handbook should include the following information:

- **Welcome to the Company.** This section includes: Mission and Values or Code of Honor, and the company's operating behaviors.
- **Employment Policies.** This section typically includes: Employment at Will, EEO, Immigration, etc.
- **Conduct in the Workplace.** This section typically includes: Harassment, Ethics, Violence in the Workplace, etc.
- **Workplace Policies.** This section typically includes: company-specific information, such as Attendance, Dress Code, Social Media, Employee Files, Fraternalization, Standards of Conduct, etc.
- **Benefits.** This section typically includes: Benefit Offerings, 401k, Time Away from Work, etc.
- **Safety in the Workplace.** This section typically includes: Worker's Compensation, Safety Information, etc.
- **Receipt of Handbook.** Ensure that your policies are clear and not open to interpretation. Have others review the policies and handbook to determine whether there is ambiguity in your message.

Set Clear Expectations

Confession: I flunked Easter Bunny coloring in kindergarten. The teacher gave us a picture of the Easter Bunny to color. She was careful to tell us to

color inside the lines, but that was all the direction we received. I completed my picture, staying inside the lines. However, instead of a pink and white bunny, I colored mine orange and green. My teacher wrote a big minus sign on the paper. She said I had not followed the rules. The next day, my mother went to school and told the teacher to never stifle my creativity (or any others') again. If I thought bunnies were polka-dotted...so be it. Yeah, Mom.

Were the rules ambiguous and open to interpretation? Yes. The teacher was not clear about her expectations, and we were being judged on a lack of information. Who was responsible for the miscommunication—the teacher or the student? In this instance, it was the teacher.

I tell this story because, when a situation occurs with an employee, the first question you must ask yourself is whether the employee clearly understood what was expected of them. If the communication was vague or assumptive, you own some responsibility for the outcome. This may be an indication that you need to update or clarify a policy or handbook and ensure more detailed communication and coaching with the employee.

If the answer to your question is yes, the expectations were clearly communicated. So, bravo — you can move forward. 🌿

Glenna Hecht, SPHR, is a speaker, trainer, consultant and author. glenna@glennahecht.com



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WHAT ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Sexual harassment stories have been in the news lately, and for good reason. For more insight from Glenna Hecht on how to craft a sound policy for your business, along with insight from industry members on what's worked, and what hasn't worked, for them, visit safnow.org/moreonline.